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Inside Washington

CIA's Helms Wins Senate Doves' OK

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WASHINGTON—It is hard to believe, but Richard Helms, director of the much-criticized Central Intelligence Agency, has become a darling of the Senate doves.

A career intelligence officer, with CIA since its founding in 1947, Helms was named director by President Johnson in 1966. President Nixon renewed the appointment early this year.

In subordinate posts Helms had seen CIA blamed abroad and at home, for goofs of all proportions. He served under two colorful and much-publicized directors of central intelligence, gentleman-spy Allen W. Dulles and hard-driving industrialist John A. McCone.

Now it is being said — and by the most critical of the Senate doves — that career-man Helms has brought a new respectability to the quiet campus-like CIA headquarters in Langley.

Exhibit A in this regard is Sen. Mike Mansfield, Mont., the Senate Democratic leader. Mansfield has been a frequent critic of Vietnam policies and of other aspects of national security planning by two administrations.

For years Mansfield has, in addition, been a leader of a so-far unsuccessful drive to apply a tighter congressional oversight to CIA activities. Yet Mansfield says Helms "has brought a respectability and integrity to the CIA...and given it the kind of standing which it lacked prior to the time he took over.

"I must say, like all those who have come in contact with him, I have been tremendously impressed. I think he is by far the best director the CIA has ever had. Because of Mr. Helms' the agency's integrity and standing have increased considerably, at least in the congressional community," says Mansfield.

ALSO FULBRIGHT — Mansfield made those comments in the Senate's secret debate on the ABM Safeguard system weeks ago. The transcript of that debate, censored and reviewed, was made public only last week. CIA data was quoted by both sides in the secret discussion, but Safeguard opponents stressed the agency's finding, made without further evaluation or comparison, that Russia had suspended work on its anti-missile system.

"APPROPRIATE OFFICIALS"

— Helms has always enjoyed the confidence of the rather hawkish senior members of the House and Senate who ride herd on CIA operations through special intelligence subcommittees. There is therefore, a real significance in his present high standing among the agency's long-time critics.

He has, in the first place, made it clear that, as the nation's top intelligence officer, he will provide the best possible reading, without bias and without trying to evaluate events abroad against developments (weapon or otherwise) in the United States. In short, Helms will provide the best available basis for U.S. policies without trying to make them.

CIA critics were never sure that Dulles and McCone were willing to stop at that.

With respect to CIA's operational responsibilities, those shadowy clandestine activities which have provoked most of CIA's criticism over the years, Helms has carefully lived up to a pledge made during his Senate confirmation hearings in 1966:

"Sir," said Helms on that occasion, "the Central Intelligence Agency takes no actions without approval from the appropriate officials of the U.S. Government, and they are not in the CIA."

After more than three years, CIA's critics are beginning to believe him.